

Summary Report on Public Input Meetings

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Collaborative
Community Planning



RENAISSANCE PLANNING GROUP

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This summary report contains the following elements:

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- Detailed Results of Discussions at All Four Meetings
- Individual Maps from Breakout Groups at All Four Meetings

1. Overview of the Process and the Input Received from Citizens

The first step in the City's Comprehensive Plan update process was to conduct four public input meetings during June and July 2008. Each meeting was conducted from 6:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., and each drew roughly twenty to thirty citizens, who provided thoughtful and energetic input to the process. Meetings were held at:

- Charlotte DeHart Elementary School – June 24
- Quarles Elementary School – June 26
- John Kerr Elementary School – July 14
- Frederick Douglass Elementary School – July 22

Facilitation of the meetings was led by Milton Herd, AICP, of Herd Planning & Design, the consulting team leader, with support from Vlad Gavrilovic, Amanda Taylor, Eric Wright, and Kristen Nelson of Renaissance Planning Group. City staff provided logistical support as well as assistance with small-group facilitation and recording.

Overall, the citizens who participated were civil, enthusiastic, and well informed about growth, development, and preservation in the City. The discussions were constructive and positive, with little argument and no rancor. Despite various disagreements about particular issues, participants were moderate and balanced in their views, and generally supportive of the City's long-range planning efforts.

Each meeting began with the consultant team giving a presentation summarizing the project objectives, scope and schedule, as well as some data on demographics and trends in the City, and the basic policies of the City's current Comprehensive Plan.

After the presentation, Mr. Herd led all the participants in a brief group discussion on the potential Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) for the future of Winchester. Following the plenary discussion, participants were divided randomly into small breakout groups to conduct mapping exercises in which they marked up base maps to identify features to preserve, and features to change, add or improve.

2. Summary of Results of Plenary Discussions

Many common themes and ideas emerged during the SWOT exercises at the four meetings. Some of the major themes that were repeatedly mentioned include the following.

Strengths and Opportunities

- Location – relative to Northern Virginia, National Parks, battlefields, I-81, regional access.
- Major institutions - Winchester Medical Center and Shenandoah University
- Public facilities – schools, especially Handley High School, parks, library, and water and sewer availability
- People – diversity, spirit of volunteerism, community spirit
- Balance - Not so big/not so small – just right; small town feel, within commuting distance to the big city
- Historic character– historic fabric, vibrant downtown, walkability, connectivity, distinctive downtown identity, front porches, significant buildings with history behind them, distinctive downtown identity creates opportunity for development/redevelopment
- Local government
- Economy – employment base of medical center and university, cost of living relative to surrounding region, downtown environment is more competitive as costs of transport go up.

Weaknesses and Threats

- City infrastructure - needs to keep up with the growth of the community - difficult to finance aging infrastructure – sidewalks, water, sewer, roads.
- Transit - need to extend and expand
- Lack of affordable housing
- Educational levels – need to be competitive for jobs
- City becoming a magnet for dependent populations
- Low income relative to Northern Virginia, housing prices down
- Cost of gas/commuting - rising gas prices will change the way we live and work
- City with ‘urbanizing’ county - inability to expand the city boundary, higher taxes with limited tax base, County development around City will tend to pull economic development from it
- What’s the City’s competitive niche and how do we get people to support retail?
- Historic income split in City – need diversity on City Council
- University and Hospital not taxable.

3. Summary of Breakout Group Discussions

In the breakout group sessions, participants identified features, sites, and resources that should be preserved or improved/changed/added, and marked these ideas on maps. These were “brainstorm” discussions, not aimed at achieving consensus, per se. Yet, many of the ideas generated enjoyed broad support from participants. Only in a few areas, was significant opposition or disagreement evident.

Things to Preserve

Many dozens of ideas, recommendations, and concerns were identified and recorded during the breakout group discussions. These ideas could be grouped into four broad thematic topics:

- *Key Sites*
- *Public Facilities, Services, and Institutions*
- *Neighborhoods and Historic Resources*
- *Environmental Elements*

Key Sites

- Glen Burnie – this site was mentioned numerous times for preservation
- Smith property [and vicinity]
- Kernstown battlefield site
- Creekside – as a model for other development in the corridor

Public Facilities, Services and Institutions

- Schools – including the idea of keeping schools as hearts of neighborhoods
- Handley High School and Handley Library were also specifically cited
- Parks and parkland – these were also cited numerous times
- Medical Center
- Shenandoah University
- Trails and paths

Neighborhoods and Historic Resources

- Downtown historic district
- Continue corridor overlay districts to protect gateway to city, historic district
- Historic sites (Abrams, Jackson’s Headquarters, Fort Loudon, etc...)
- Neighborhood-based identity and preservation

Environmental Elements

- Wetlands – including Abrams creek wetland
- Town Run

Things to Change, Improve or Add

Many dozens of ideas were also identified and recorded for additions and improvements to the City's fabric. These ideas could be grouped into six broad thematic topics:

- *Key Sites*
- *Key Corridors*
- *Downtown/Neighborhoods*
- *Public Facilities, Services, and Institutions*
- *Economy/Housing*
- *Environmental Elements*

Key Sites

Multiple mentions were made for:

- Redevelop Ward Plaza – nearly every group identified this as a key site
- Redevelop National Fruit
- Redevelop Martin's Grocery Store site
- Glen Burnie – allow public access; develop as New Urbanist community

Other key sites mentioned included:

- Develop Smith Property into mixed-use community
- Redevelop Papermill
- Coca-cola plant
- Redevelop O'Sullivan's
- Apple Blossom Mall - revive
- Holliday Apartments
- Redevelop old Nichols facility
- Redevelop Abex Asbestos site – maybe into green
- Revitalize and complement Zero Pak redevelopment including the RR land
- Restore Triangle Diner

Key Corridors

- North Cameron – multiple mentions, including making it two-way – Don't rush traffic through town, and adding a landscaped median or greenway along sidewalk
- Enhance Berryville Avenue corridor
- Improve Route 11 into town, national bike corridor
- Redevelop Valley Avenue

Other key corridors mentioned included:

- Complete Meadow Branch Avenue [this was shown on numerous group maps]
- Revitalize Kent Street corridor
- Redevelop multi-family adjacent to I-81

- Fort Collier Road Area
- Woodstock Road /Timbrook Area
- Improve corridors to downtown
- Entry corridors

Downtown/Neighborhoods

- Downtown – keep historic buildings but revitalize; Theaters/Performance arts centers; fill/rehab vacant downtown spaces; downtown retail store hours to stay open for customers at key times; Mixed use on upper levels
- NE area of city in need of redevelopment
- Redevelopment of south industrial area
- Housing stock of older neighborhoods need rehabilitation
- Need affordable decent rentals
- Enforce current codes
- Rehab old houses
- Make streets grid pattern in new development

Public Facilities, Services and Institutions

- Finish the Green Circle trail; Connect via Glen Burnie to Whittier Park
- Connect sidewalks in town
- More pedestrian friendly streets
- Bury telephone/utility lines downtown
- Need additional parkland – places to walk to
- Convert to two-way traffic on Cameron and Braddock (worked well on Piccadilly)
- Make downtown more tourist-friendly
- Problem – one-way streets and traffic flow
- Improve connectivity to the areas that need it.

Economy/Housing

- More Manufacturing jobs means higher incomes - Keep some industry in the city
- Need to generate revenue to support services
- Need vocational training in city
- Issue: Large Amount of Tax Exempt Properties
- Older industrial areas can be redeveloped as new, clean industries with skilled labor – e.g. – sustainable energy industries
- Need more attractive/compatible new buildings
- Housing Authority

Environmental Elements

- Naturalize Town Run – helps with clean up
- Don't need to mow everything – keep more native habitats/wetlands
- Plant more trees – street and in industrial areas
- More LID [low impact development] – rain gardens/infiltration ditch

4. Summary of Agreement and Conflict

Agreement

There was substantial general agreement among participants on many ideas, including:

- The need for revitalization and redevelopment of various key sites, especially Ward's plaza, and other older, underused commercial and industrial sites
- The need for continued efforts at historic preservation and rehabilitation, especially in the downtown area, including new uses, mixed uses, and somewhat greater intensification
- The need to preserve, enhance, and expand the existing parks and trails system, including completing the Green Circle Trail
- The need for infrastructure upgrades, especially sidewalks and key street connections, including completing the connection of Meadow Branch Avenue

There also seemed to be a broadly felt, generally positive view toward growth and revitalization within the City, including the "new urbanist" principles of mixed-use, connectivity, and human-scale, pedestrian-friendly development. There was also a generally positive view toward the trend of diversity in population and housing.

There also appeared to be broadly shared concerns about the impact of rising fuel costs, the impact of growth in the County that could compete or conflict with the City's efforts to attract jobs, the recognition of the need for higher educational levels in the local labor force, and the need for finding a competitive niche for commercial and industrial growth.

Conflict

There did not appear to be a lot of fundamental disagreement among participants. Areas and topics where disagreement was evident concerned two key sites within the City:

- The Glen Burnie property, and
- The Smith property (and vicinity) in the northwest sector.

The strongest sentiment was clearly to preserve the Glen Burnie site as an open space resource, although at least one participant identified it as having potential for a "new urban" community. The Smith property generated stronger sentiment for development, although some participants preferred that it be preserved. Also note that one breakout group showed the eastern portion of the Handley High School site developed with intensive infill development. This idea did not seem to enjoy broad support, although it was not discussed in detail.

Questions of priorities for the allocation of finite City resources among these various topics of agreement were not specifically addressed in these initial input meetings. Some disagreement about priorities is inevitable, and those issues will need to be addressed as the plan update moves forward.

5. Summary of Mapping Exercises

At each of the meetings, participants were divided at random into small groups to brainstorm ideas and issues, and to mark-up base maps of the City showing those ideas. Citizens were asked to show two basic items on the base maps:

- Areas or features that should be preserved or remain the same (green)
- Areas or features that should be changed, improved, or added (red)

On the following pages are two maps which show composite summaries of all 17 group maps from the four meetings. The first map shows a total composite of the group maps, with all of the mark-up ideas layered over one another.

The second map shows a simplified, interpretive summary of all of those mark-ups, with redundancies eliminated or reduced, revealing the major themes that appeared to enjoy broad support among participants.



